



Westerly activists and church are turning North End around

01:00 AM EDT on Wednesday, July 12, 2006

BY ARLINE A. FLEMING

Journal Staff Writer

WESTERLY -- Growing up in the North End in the 1950s, Adrian Pelchat's mother would often send him to Mary Restelli's Market to fetch some bread, or Tuty's A&P, just around the corner, for other groceries.

"It was the kind of neighborhood where, when kids were over playing, your mother would call their mother and say I'll send them home after supper," he recalled. She'd feed them all, and then they'd walk through the neighborhood of closely constructed two- and three-story houses -- many fronted with elegant stonework -- to their own front doors, often unlocked.

There were so many friends and family-run businesses in the area that his mother could have sent him on errands the daylong -- everything was within walking distance. But as Pelchat grew older, the neighborhood began to change.

Longtime residents died, and their children moved away. Then, the houses were bought by owners who lived elsewhere and didn't have a personal stake in their upkeep.

The area fell on hard times, with drug sales casting a pall over the neighborhood. Pelchat said there were some real hot spots to avoid, with drugs and crime becoming more common than neighborliness.

The Rev. Joshua A. McClure, pastor of the Pleasant Street Baptist Church, who, along with Pelchat, helped develop the North End Crime Watch and Community Development Corporation, said the neighborhood was going downhill. "Multiple family houses were being rented out by landlords who didn't care about them."

But in 2001, the town began working with the local Crime Watch/Community Development Inc. to make physical improvements in the area. A 2003 revitalization plan followed with suggestions and strategies -- one of them being historic preservation.

That plan took shape recently when the North End neighborhood was added to the National Register of Historic Places -- the federal government's list of properties whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation.

According to the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, the designation brings with it "tax credits and other incentives ... to aid in rehabilitation and revitalization of this important historic neighborhood."

Westerly Town Planner William Haase said the register designation will build neighborhood pride. The nomination was prepared by preservation consultant Kathryn J. Cavanaugh of Providence, who praised the town for its revitalization efforts in the North End, especially given the area's rich historical legacy.

The North End, which sits within shouting distance of the Connecticut border, has had its highs and lows during the century and a half since the first millworkers settled in what was once known as Stillmanville. The 150 acres today contains 243 buildings, among them, a church, a mill, a school, two social clubs and 43 commercial or mixed-use buildings on narrow and irregular streets, notes the Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission. Italian-Americans once gravitated to the neighborhood, the exterior stonework which still exists in front of many North End houses is evidence of their skills.

"So many Westerly people have roots in the North End," said the Rev. McClure, a former neighborhood resident.

A groundbreaking was held last month for a Habitat for Humanity project and applications were recently taken for two affordable-housing units that will be built at Pierce Street and Lilac Drive.

"It's coming back to the kind of community it was. Being on the Historic Register is going to make a big difference. People are going to take pride in the area," said McClure. Pelchat, too, can recall both the bad times and the good, having witnessed it from the house on Pierce Street where he grew up.

Pelchat can recall backyards where neighbors raised chickens, pigs and goats and maintained large vegetable gardens. He recalls addressing neighbors and businesses by nickname or family name.

He drives around the neighborhood recalling what used to be. A local mayonnaise company, Sydnor's "that was very, very popular," so popular that summer visitors listed bringing some home among their vacation activities. He recalled a soda distributor, a social club, a TV store, more markets he referred to by their Italian names, including the newly refurbished home of the North End Crime Watch and another market so small the owners baked the bread in the house next door.

He stops his truck to chat with a member of the Pleasant Street Baptist Church which sits up on a neighborhood hill. He talks of how the church and its members have been instrumental to the North End's revitalization just by being a stable presence.

"I can go on and on about the neighborhood," said Pelchat. "We've been fighting for it for a long time."

"It's a very positive thing," said Haase, the town planner, pointing out a structure undergoing renovation. "This is an intact neighborhood. There has never been urban renewal here."

The recent federal recognition, Haase said, is a way to sustain the neighborhood. Pelchat, who said he felt a sense of victory with the Historic District listing, noted: "We had to take a stand and do something. It's coming around."